

How-To Get Access to Organic Food, Economically

NCAMP board member Terry Shistar buys low-cost organic food through a food co-op and buying club

Terry Shistar, Ph.D.

Virtually all the food I buy is organic. We do not spend all our money on food, though, and our family includes three large males with appetites to match.

I am often asked how can we afford to buy organic food. My first answer is that for me buying organic isn't just a food choice, it is also a health care choice. Organic food saves me the expense (and other side effects) of surgery and drug therapy.

My next answer is food co-ops. I belong to two food cooperatives that help supply me with organic foods at reduced costs. One looks like a typical grocery store—of the community type. The second is a food-buying club. The two co-ops serve two different needs, and are both important. Although I want to focus on the food-buying club, I want to stress the importance of the other as well.

What is a Co-op

A cooperative is a business or service that is member-owned and member-controlled. In the case of a consumer co-op, the members are consumers of the goods or services provided by the co-op. Cooperatives around the world subscribe to a basic philosophy as described by six principles:

1. Open membership. Membership is open to all people who want to make use of the services in exchange for the responsibilities of membership.

2. Democratic control. Co-op members are all equal co-owners of the cooperative and have an equal say in decision making.

3. Return of surplus to members. Any surplus or profit belongs to its members, not a small group of share-holders.

4. Limited rate of return on investment. Co-ops exist to provide services for members, not to invest capital.

5. Belief in education. Co-ops are committed to education.

6. Cooperation among co-ops. Co-ops work with other co-ops.

The Community Mercantile

I have been a member of the Community Mercantile in Lawrence, Kansas for twenty years. The "Merc" started out as a food-buying club, but I joined it when it was a small storefront where you had to work four hours per month in order to buy food at member prices. The general public paid a slightly higher price.

The Merc now offers a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, frozen and canned goods, as well as most of the non-food items you would expect in a grocery store. Members get a 10% discount once a month. Members who volunteer for more than four hours in a month get a 10% discount on all their purchases in the next month. I work every Monday filling jars in the bulk herb section—which carries around 300 different herbs and teas in bulk, and is known as a real bargain in herbs and spices even among people who don't care about the other things the Merc offers.

The Merc is dedicated to supplying organic foods, but carries conventionally grown foods when organic foods are unavailable or as an alternative to certain expensive organic foods. I shop at the Merc at least once a week. I buy fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and baked goods there, and other things I don't want to buy in the bulk quantities offered by the buying club.

The Washington Creek Community Food Co-op

A few years ago, we learned of a group of people in Burlingame, Kansas who had a food buying club, where they bought food in bulk from a natural foods distributor every six weeks at great savings. Burlingame is a 45-minute drive from where I live, but their co-op allowed us to try it out for a couple of times before deciding whether we were interested in forming our own food co-op. As it turns out, our co-op and the Burlingame co-op are very different, and it shows that you can arrange a food-buying club to meet your needs.

When we decided we wanted to form our own food-buying club, we got together a small group of people—enough, we hoped, to meet the minimum order of \$500 every six weeks. We called Blooming Prairie, the distributor that supplies the Burlingame co-op. They sent us a "Buying Club Manual" with detailed information on starting and running a cooperative food-buying club. That made it really easy. If you decide to form a food buying co-op, you will probably find such help available. Let me run through the minimum requirements.

1. You need enough people to share the work and meet the minimum orders of your distributors. In a cooperative, everyone contributes. Some co-ops having "working" and "non-working" status. For the new food-buying club, it is best for everyone to share the work. However, it is not necessarily limited to people who can carry heavy boxes when the truck arrives. There are jobs for everyone. Here are some important jobs in our co-op:

Treasurer. This is the person who

keeps the checkbook and makes sure that income matches outgo. It is an important job, requiring careful attention, but not much physical activity.

Order coordinator. This is my job. I receive the orders from members two weeks before delivery date. I collate them and send them to Blooming Prairie a week before the delivery, and download and print invoices on the day of the delivery. I can do all this because Blooming Prairie supplied us (for a small fee) with a computer program that does most of the work, and I have a computer

with a modem that runs it. (Actually, before Blooming Prairie developed their program, I had my own DBASE program that did the collating.) In the Burlingame co-op, the order coordinator is a committee chair. The committee collates

the orders of 30 families by hand, writing each item on an index card. It's a lot of work, but in this rural community, it is also a social event.

Phone calls. The day before the order arrives, Blooming Prairie calls us to tell us when to expect the truck. Someone calls everyone who ordered and tells them when to be there.

Book pick-up. Every month there are different items on sale, and there is a whole book of special prices. Usually the new specials book is delivered with the previous order, but sometimes the timing doesn't work out, and new

books are delivered between orders. In those cases, one of our members receives the books and lets people pick them up from her.

Delivery day crew. The number of people needed to meet the truck and divide up orders depends on how big the order is and how much it is broken down. We order mostly cases and bulk items. (Some items, such as boxes of tea bags and "health and beauty aids" come by the piece.) We encourage members to work with each other if they want split cases and sometimes offer surplus for anyone

to buy, but we do not allow members to order one can of chili or one pound of cheese. As order coordinator, I try to ensure that surplus items will be something of interest to others. The Burlingame co-op allows

members to order individual items from a case, or smaller amounts of cheese, flours, or chocolate chips from bulk quantities. Four people is enough to divide our order. Twenty people may work on delivery day in Burlingame.

2. You need a place to meet the truck and divide the order. Our co-op meets the truck at a church and divides the order in the church basement, which has refrigerators, tables, heat in winter, and air conditioning in summer. It's a very good deal, and we make contributions to the church to give our thanks. The Burlingame co-op meets the truck in a church parking lot,

transfers the food to pick-ups, and divides the order in the home of one of the members. They have much more limited space for keeping things cool in summer. Members bring a cooler for frozen or refrigerated items in the summer.

3. You need a distributor. You may want to work with more than one. In addition to Blooming Prairie, some members of our co-op get organic coffee from Royal Blue Organics. If you're ambitious, you could also work a deal with local growers in a subscription vegetable service.

What can you buy through a food-buying club?

Our co-op buys mostly bulk foods and cases. Especially good buys are cheeses, soy products, and toiletries. A five-pound block of Organic Valley mild cheddar sells for \$3.77 per pound, plus tax and whatever surcharges your co-op may have. A case of twelve 33.8-ounce containers of Edensoy Plain (organic) soy milk costs \$20.89. Muir Glen organic tomato products are also a favorite.

The selection is huge. You can buy refrigerated products like milk, yogurt, and tofu; frozen juices, baked goods, meat, fruits, and vegetables; baking supplies, flours, beans, cooking oils, and more in large quantities and small; environmentally friendly brands of detergents and other household products; a huge variety of toiletries and cosmetics; and vitamins, homeopathic and herbal remedies, and nutritional supplements.

Not everything is organic, but Blooming Prairie codes organic products according to whether they:

- Meet organic standards for 36 months or more,
- Meet organic standards for 12 to 36 months,
- Contain organic ingredients of



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- varying standards, or
- Have paperwork pending on organic standards.

Are there other costs?

Our co-op has an equity account at Blooming Prairie Co-op equal to our average order—around \$1200. (Not everyone buys as much as our family.) We built up that account over a couple of years at a rate of 5% per order. In addition, we have had to impose small additional charges in the past to cover mistakes, bank charges, etc. We now pay only sales tax in addition to the order. We usually get an additional 1% volume discount.

Some co-ops may have to pay for the space to meet the truck and divide

the order. We make contributions to the church, generally in surplus food.

If you divide cheese or other bulk items, you will need a scale and bags or wrap. A calculator is essential for last-minute adjustments to invoices, or to add up the whole thing if you are less computerized than we are. You will need markers that will mark on a variety of packing materials for distributing food. All of these can generally be supplied by a member for delivery day. Blooming Prairie also carries bags and wraps in bulk quantities.

Other benefits

Being able to afford the best food is a major benefit of food co-ops. An added benefit is sharing the experience with

others. We trade recipes, meet new people, and learn about new foods. Some of our members with experience in homeopathic and herbal remedies have shared that with us. And in this competitive world, we also enjoy sharing a cooperative work experience. *Bon appétit!*

[Note: Write NCAMP with your experiences—good or bad—getting access to organic food products. We would like to help improve the ability of people to get access to good wholesome food that does not poison them and the environment.]

Consumer owned marketing cooperatives and a couple of private enterprises:

Northeast Co-op, Inc. George Southworth, Marketing Manager, P.O. Box 8188, Brattleboro, VT 05304, 802-257-5856, 802-257-7039 (fax).

Hudson Valley Federation, Lee Helff, General Manager, 6 Noxon Road, Poughkeepsie, NY 12503, 914-473-5400, 914-473-5458 (fax).

Orange County Warehouse, Garrett Alford, General Manager, P.O. Box 4159, Gainesville, FL 32616, 904-372-7061, 904-372-7988 (fax).

Federation of Ohio River Co-ops, Bob Pickford, General Manager, 320 Outerbelt Highway, Suite E, Columbus, OH 43213, 614-861-2446, 614-861-7638 (fax).

North Farm Cooperative, Mel Braverman, General Manager, 204 Regas Road, Madison, WI 53714, 608-241-2667, 608-241-0688 (fax).

Roots and Fruits Produce Co-op, Lori Zuidema, General Manager, 1929 E. 24th Street, Minneapolis, MN 55404, 612-722-3030, 612-722-0882 (fax).

Blooming Prairie Natural Foods, Jim Felick, Resident Manager, 510 Kasota SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414, 612-378-9774, 612-378-9780 (fax).

Blooming Prairie Warehouse, Jesse Singerman, Chief Executive Office, 2340 Heinz Road, Iowa City, IA 52240, 319-337-6448, 319-337-4592 (fax).

Ozark Cooperative Warehouse, Nick Masullo, General Manager, 1601 Pump Station Road, Fayetteville, AR 72701, 501-521-4920, 501-521-9100 (fax).

Tucson Cooperative Warehouse, Nina Darlington, General Manager, 350 S. Toole Avenue, Tucson, AZ 85701, 602-884-9951, 602-792-3258 (fax).

Nutrasource, Michael Funk, 4005 Sixth Avenue, South, Seattle, WA 98108, 206-467-7190, 206-682-1485 (fax).

Mountain People, Michael Funk, 12745 Earhart Avenue, Auburn, CA 95602, 1-800-679-8735, 916-889-9554 (fax).